

# CROP ROTATION

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A VOLUME OF POETRY



ERIC JANSSON

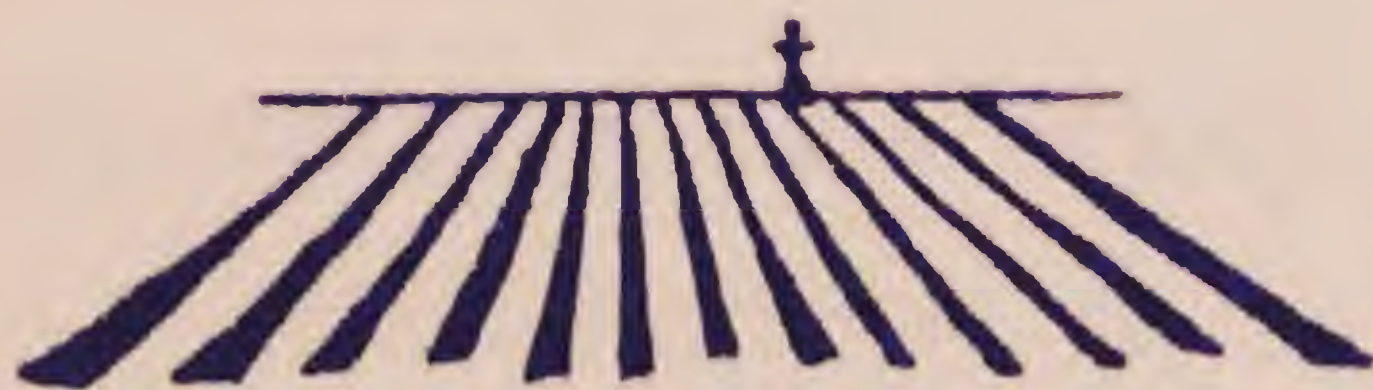


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WRITTEN AT  
SWARTHMORE COLLEGE  
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*The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom, but the tares are the children of the wicked one;*

*The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are the angels.*

*- Matthew 13: 38-39*



The Johnsons are planted next to the Rodinskis,  
the Armegenians are planted next to Frederick T. Baer.

This will last for a cenury.  
maybe more, without protest

from anyone,  
the management or the squirrels.  
Hundreds of people, thousands perhaps--

children of children of children  
of children, and several eccentric uncles  
wearing inappropriate vests, will file past.

The sun will approve,  
trees will grow a little.

Cynthia Rodinski, 1907-1985,  
will be slowly imprisoned  
by complex root systems.

At night, the moon will peer.

The Johnsons will divorce  
of natural causes-- soil shifts  
and a lowering water table.

These same shifts will force Frederick T. Baer  
to perform a headstand for 126 years  
until his neck snaps mercifully.

Mars will scowl from afar.

Walter Rodinski alone is dead.  
He lives in Heaven's ignorant bliss  
with a woman whom he believes to be his wife.

How he would cry  
to learn otherwise.



I.

Winter's last gasp slips through  
the windowpane, an unformed  
word from greying lips.

Masses of warm snow crawl across  
the grass, rotting albino  
flounder shrinking to the sea,

eyes turned earthward; moist soil  
churns out new worms and chipmunks  
drunk with post-hibernal hunger.

People start getting ideas.

Radio waves skitter across  
the nitrogen atmosphere,  
celebrating the waking dead.

Lazarus will walk  
for nine agonizing months,  
then sleep again, cold and dry.

II.

The city's rain,  
revolted by

her gaudy  
petroleum hues,

terrorized by the gravitational  
pull of a death march

to the poison  
harbor, slinks

into a pothole  
praying,

too heavy  
to evaporate.



III.

An aged moral eel curses  
fate in his recessed murkdom.  
Life hasn't changed in 2000 years.

Capture, chomp, devour, digest.

Jailed behind snow  
shovels, barbeque ovens begin  
their insidious domination  
of aspiring neighborhood heroes.

Cows march into the slaughterhouse.

Seeds, happy to be seeds,  
are thrown from the farmer's  
warm hand, crushed under his feet,  
and later trampled by machinery.

Local cemetary workers sigh

contentedly, their spades sliding  
through the dirt with newfound ease.  
Life hasn't changed in 2000 years!



Friday nights  
kenosha's young hookies are down  
by peach blossom reservoir--

bathed in blue  
light sprawled across kingdom  
come, going  
quietly as millenia.

Erwin M.,  
whose surname remains unrevealed,  
goes there to touch a girlfriend's nerve,

she softly  
says, he's not entirely successful but  
sweet, sweetly  
peach blossom gentle.

Gentle  
M., blessedly pre-complete and evening  
reservoir peach blossom sweet,

dreams quietly  
a cross bathed in light--  
going, coming,  
sprawled across millenia in blue

friday nights  
when kenosha's young hookies are down  
by peach blossom reservoir.



the japanese maple

barely has a landscape  
on each limb spacious  
enough for an aphid, yet

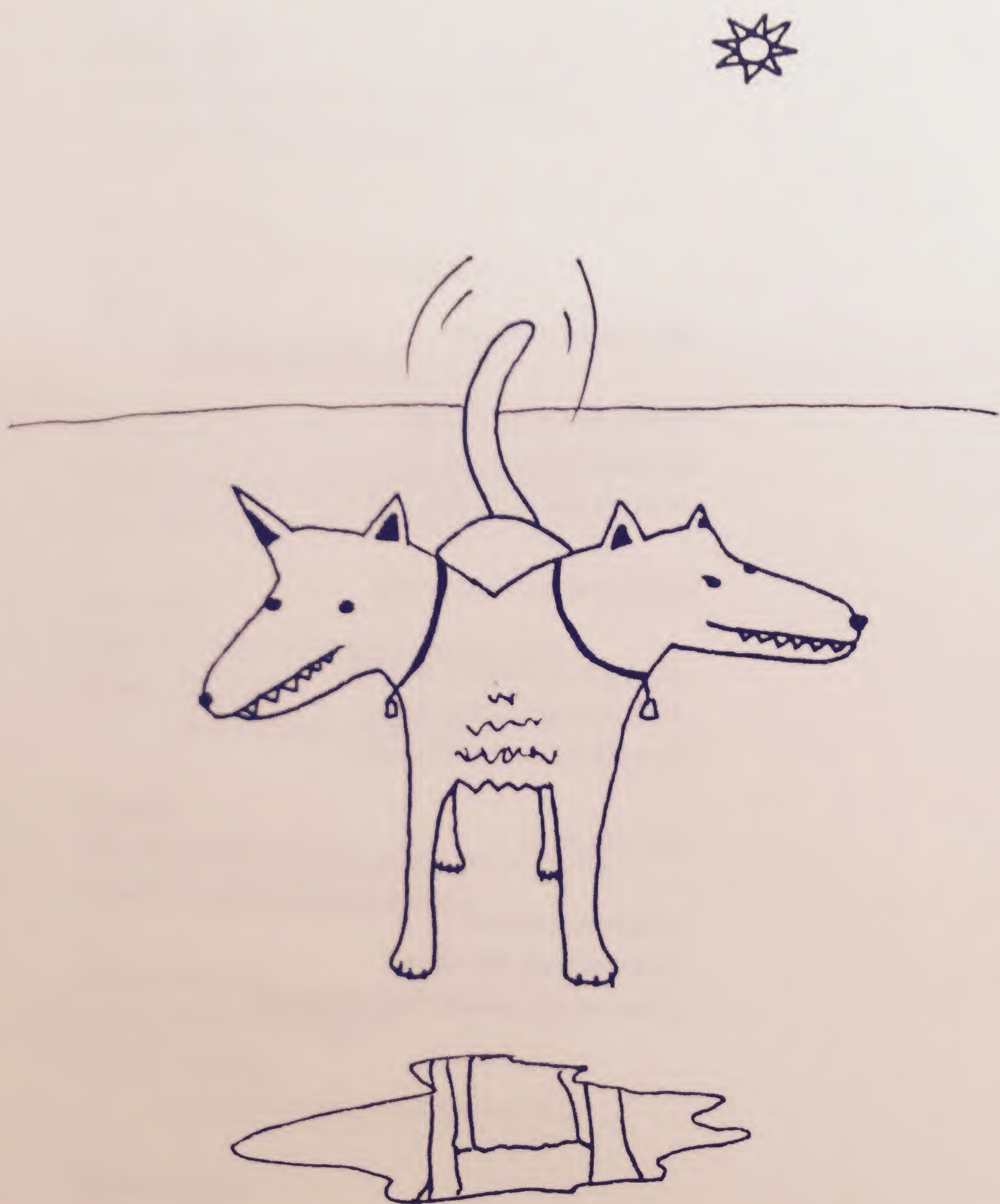
iced over and immobile

through november's cold  
with months more to go  
brutally encased in snow,

she sleeps in

a dubious dream,  
entertaining the idea  
of someday conceiving coconuts.







I am a dog  
named Businessman  
who eats

His

scraps and  
wags his hand and  
me

who's a dog  
named Other Guy  
who wants  
my slice of the

Shepherd's

pie.  
Both of us are the same  
and alone,  
a two-headed dog  
chewing up the wrong bones.

We are the dog playing  
dead south of Sidon  
who looks  
at the ground  
when in search of  
the sky. In a puddle,  
once, I thought I saw

God

my master  
sin  
king  
into the sod.



Bauzys' brow is the horizon,  
where sweat beads  
between plowlines

and the sickle  
seeks fresh stalks.  
Our stomachs are full

of bread and onions,  
our legs too heavy  
for dancing.

The young mother  
tells a story  
to the field:

You were once  
a dimple-chinned  
child swimming

mid-air like a young bird  
pushed from the nest.  
Your fingers reached

into the earth, plucking  
sweet green onions  
for the evening's broth.

You would lick dirt  
from your nails  
and we would laugh!



You would stamp on  
the ground, making  
onion wine,

but the soil developed  
an early appetite for you,  
and under it you've grown

rich and strong.  
You are a broad field  
of onions, resting

under moonlight,  
swimming in the rain,  
whistling in the west wind,

and I am your mother.



It entered the room  
from his heart up

through the boiling  
glottal well,

a baritone rumble,  
a steamer from Sweden

docking on the dinner table  
with a cargo of faith and war,

theology and industry, words  
breathed from cracked lips,

and he bore down upon them  
with engineer's determination,

pressures churned in still air,  
fingers clutched flesh and sought

more, our gracious heavenly  
father emerged from a squall

each foggy morning in the metal  
chorus of a moaning hull

to a family at ease  
and attention. Amen.



I sat bewildered  
with a magazine, listening  
to my grandmother sing

hymns in the shower,  
supposing myself  
upside-down and she  
rightside-up, flipping

my eleven year-old eyes  
transfixedly through  
pages of magnificently-  
breasted female hunters  
in a scientific journal

as water dripped from  
the floor and splattered  
on the ceiling, savoring  
sweet apple juice

from a disposable cup  
and quietly gunning  
for the lion

to lie down with the lamb.  
My grandmother emerged, squeaky  
clean, and I fell asleep

with my nose  
between the pages.  
She passed away last year.







♦ PAUL, MY LANDLADY'S LOVER ♦  
AND DRINKING COMPANION

---

Thorn in the flesh, this life, he'll tell you.  
But don't filter that pain-- breathe it, live it, he says.

"Or shut up  
and die."

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly  
met at his birthday party and became friends.

They became his friends,  
and with friends like that...

They became his guardian angels  
and, alternately, his guardian demons.

They golf with him.  
In the neighborhood lawns and gardens, that's who he's with.

They are his handicap--  
his unfair advantage.

Partners for life. Something he can grab.  
Reality insurance.

He is not just some crazy old lonely fool  
wielding a 9-iron in the Doyle's tulips.

And if you think he is, he'll tell you  
you must be some crazy old lonely fool.

Paul smiles, and drags back at his pleasures.  
Today is a good day-- a real day.

Paul takes his life  
with a pinch of death.



You behaved badly today,

reducing garage doors to rumored wisps  
of splinters and hinges, banishing dogs

to closets and stealing two old ladies,  
their lonely canes clanking on the ground.

I saw your blackening palm,  
your greedy fingertips

swiveling with nervous delight from jumpy  
knuckles, the tightening of your chaotic grip,

and I heard the icy vow you spat  
in stone on the Oldsmobile.

I have a vow for you,  
my love: I will be

a chainsaw in the sky,  
unwelcome mediator

between pressure systems.  
I will reduce you

to barometric myth  
trapped in a textbook.

I will show you unchartable storms--  
the beating of a human heart



thrust into your world  
of electric snakes

whipping the ground  
with blue rattles,

hidden schnauzers, dejected  
grandsons and ruined Oldsmobiles.

I will observe your hand again  
and again, memorize its lumbering

textures, search for the place  
to poke clear through.



Smallman Bob  
sits indianstyle  
on the sidewalk outside  
my House.  
Squinting tighter than his shoelaces,  
trying to break beyond the reflections  
so he can see my

Dog.

But it will never work,  
and he will never see my

Dog.

"My Dog is invisible,  
and He tends to stay that way."  
I told Bob that.  
I told the Smallman to watch out,  
lest he get what he's asking for.  
Best he go look in some other fellow's Window  
for a while.  
I like to keep Mine Shut.



The boughs were black

after noon, the robin

steaming in the sun

seeking moist cessation

grey flesh to sooth,

ventured from her gnarl

three months without

a raspy red throat.

We walked to the park

to see how he was--

to visit an old friend

a big pile of anti-matter

with wooden arms.



Before my eyes  
understood  
they needed glasses

my mother was a ghost  
in blue sweatpants  
picking weeds

from between  
the tulips, and  
the local Armenians

who ate grapeleaves  
ripped from  
our August vines

were black-eyed  
romantics whose  
secrets I presumed

could not be seen.  
My mother  
is neither

a wine-drinker nor  
a ghost;  
the Armenians had

pulled of the road  
in a Volkswagon  
with my mother's consent.

But I was 45 inches tall  
upside-down, unconscious  
and content--

forked tip  
of a grapevine  
thrust out

my mouth, eyes closed--  
sucking for all  
it was worth.



She was oddly  
taken with me  
in an army green

gunny sack slung over  
our parents' shoulders.  
We were refugees

from the sitting room  
which, on Sunday afternoons,  
was conquered by

Aleksandr Nevsky.  
His minor armies  
overthrew the couch,

his regiments occupied  
the wing chairs while his  
legions took the piano

by surprise. We refugees  
(and, no, we won't be  
coming back) were

ignorant amidst attack  
that Uncle Joseph's dead  
and old. He's not

the one who trampled  
over the Baltic  
steppes, over battle haunts

nor this May Day morning  
flaunts missiles  
that can kill

a man, plus a million  
pals and relatives.  
Sleeping like babies

freshly launched,  
we were silo suckers  
from the start.



The grizzly old man is following  
us around again, with his saliva

streaked cheek, ghastly little hobble,  
marble eyes and nosehair burning

red, shuffling out footsteps  
to the sound of swimming violins

in limitless space;  
he's chasing us down

with an outstretched palm,  
a crumpled dollar, a new fence

for your impoverished goat,  
a promise to replace the old sun

with a better, brighter one,  
an insurance policy, an idea.

And if we take it,  
in this process

of removing the stars,  
perhaps, he says,

we shall know night without  
the distraction of distant glitters  
or sleepless reflection

of the moon.  
But to build  
a new sun,



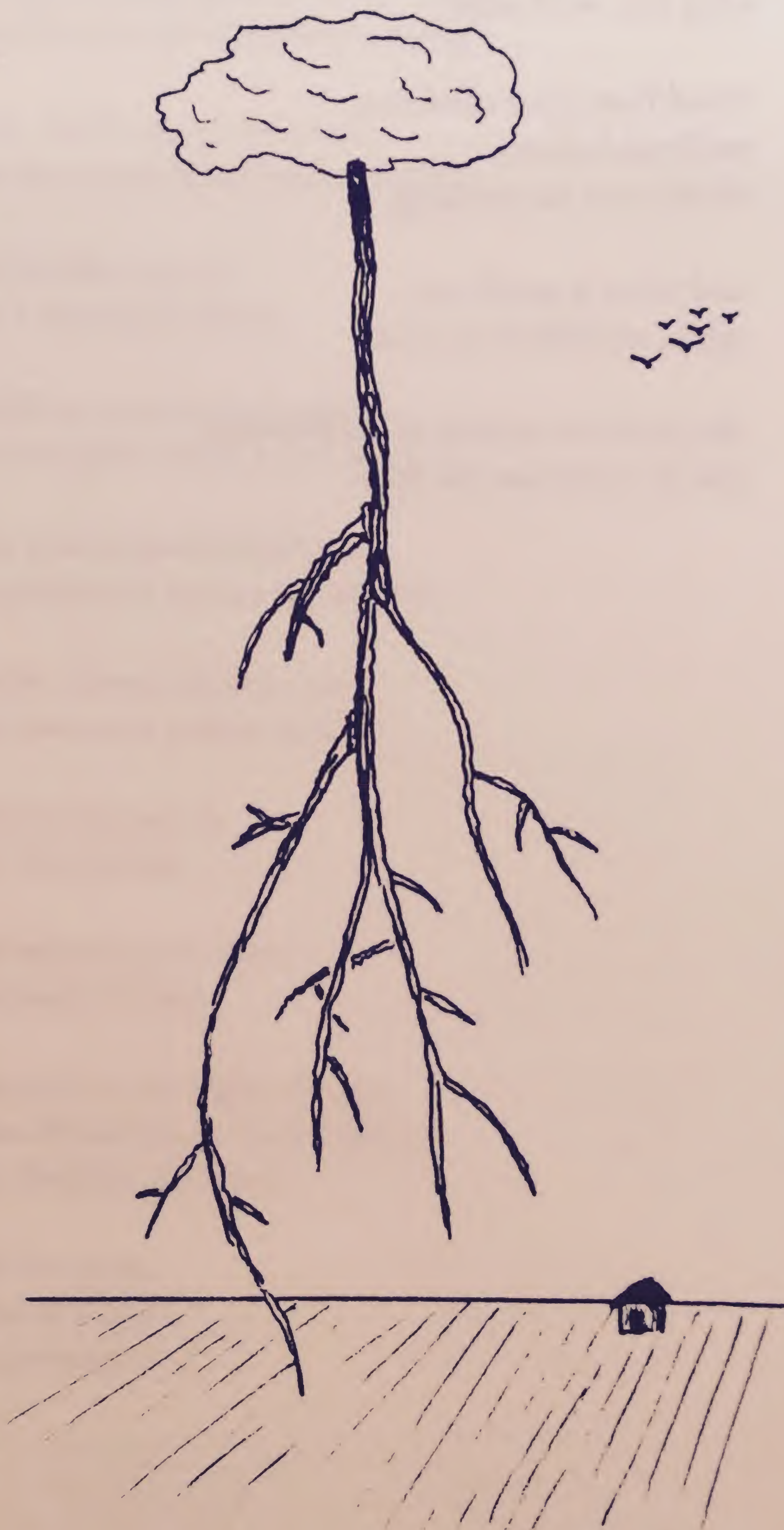
we'll need fire,  
and to build  
a big fire, we'll need

wood from your old fence,  
we'll need plenty  
of old men for kindling,

and when it snuffs out  
again, we'll find we need

the generous melody of his footsteps  
just to remember the tune.







She'll write off this page  
before surrendering to its trap,  
skeptical of whether  
wind, rain or thunderclap's

indicative of anything  
that Heaven has to offer  
outside the lightning gun-bolt  
with which He'll inevitably off her.

Her lines are so persuading.  
(Damnation is so deep.)  
Love is too expensive,  
and love like this, so cheap.

My mouth is clamped.  
My head, it aches.  
My pen is running dry.

Oh, how stinkingly silent  
a Devil's advocate am I.



Scientists have conceived  
lenses through which men  
may safely observe God's  
infamously blinding nightshirt.

Officials have conspired  
to distribute them  
throughout the citizenry  
in preparation for judgement.

Families gleefully await  
stingless death as they do  
the tangible, enticing  
mysteries of Christmas morning,

cheering on elders to hasten  
their expiration, to cash  
in on a lifetime's insatiable  
appetite for knowledge.

Curious nations race  
headlong toward vision  
as consumers flood opticians  
in search of the perfect frames.

Artists claiming reincarnation  
produce sketches from recollection  
of the old man's face, and churches  
retouch their icons accordingly.

Wealthy parishoners dream of  
posh heavenly mansions, opulent  
eternal lifestyles, extending advance  
invitations to exclusive cocktail soirées.



Benevolent angels swoop down,  
warning of disaster, but  
their pleas drown in  
the stew of hysterical chatter.

Deathbeds are rapidly inhabited and abandoned.

Erwin M. pokes timidly  
up the marble staircase.  
Through the lenses, he discerns  
something dark and unexpected.



Maybe Bela  
Bartok  
could dance

to the  
mikrokosmos  
midst a war

of phones  
and ethics  
in a Hungary

once  
unsung, explore  
what morbid

intervals  
the rest  
of us



ignore and lie  
within  
the off

beat of  
a funeral  
drum

What is  
it that makes  
Hungarian blood

hounds follow  
your echoing

thud?



Paul stares up  
from bed at the portrait  
of Grandma. He is ready

for the morning lecture.  
As always, she speaks  
of sin and golfing

on the Sabbath.  
He cannot logically  
reconcile the two.

She goes on about  
the tragedy of divits  
and the sanctity

of God's creation.  
Paul snores away.  
Grandma is irate.

Unable to reawaken  
him, she falls  
silent in time.

Hours pass.  
Paul rolls over.  
Grandma poses

in Punjab, circa 1894.  
Later that day on  
the empty links,

physics betrays the aging  
idiot, the jet stream  
rushes furiously west.

Gravity is increased  
twofold, vectors of  
inertia are inverted.



Conservation of mass  
suspends itself, the sea  
and sky trade places.

With an anxious  
whack, Paul disappears  
in a cloud of pale dust.

In his silent  
bedroom, tears blend  
fragile cheekbones

with fair skin  
and the remnants of blue  
irises. They run down

Grandma's neck, collecting  
in a murky pool at the base  
of her ancient frame.



The tenth Beethoven symphony,  
little-known and rarely performed,

features tantrums of tympany,  
strings and brass that shatter

the perfection of human form.  
You may doubt me-- my heart maintains

this cursed, forbidden work exists.  
I have heard the thrashing of angel wings

and seen the flicker of wiggling flames  
round the ashen remains of orchestra pits.

The heartbreak of his adagio spells  
so clearly deafness and defeat

in the midst of sin at last expelled  
without rumbled sigh, a single stroke

of the dry drum lends a deathly beat.  
I am not the first to require salvation

nor the last to dread its implications,  
what most I fear, blindly mistaking

your voice for that of a well-moved man,  
glancing over my back at threatening damnation.

Can one live in the kingdom of mimicry  
not failing rightly to distinguish

human achievement from divine victory?  
do the flames of one burn less hotly

than the other's when life is extinguished?  
When an instrument weeps is it owned by you



who formed flesh to carve the perfect phrase  
though our same arms reflexively pursue

your end? Bloodless, my fingers wrap  
the violin neck, set to play.

An empty rafter snap alerts  
my right arm to defense; I bow

warily into the brash first  
movement, crafting another voice--

whose, I do not know.  
Listen for yourself, that is all,

forgiving presumptions misplaced  
and my fiddle's less than godly drawl.

If this work proves only a fraud,  
unhesitatingly lay me to waste:

A human form shattered  
in strings and brass,

a tantrum of little tympany,  
known but rarely performed,

like a tenth Beethoven symphony.



I watched the creeping run  
in a stewardess' stocking

climb toward the movie screen  
as her hands offered me

cream and sugar; my sister  
and I were flying home

for our grandmother's memorial  
service, watching Soviet cinema

somewhere over Greenland.  
Slava had just postponed marriage

to repel the assault on Moscow;  
Nastia, his fiance, was emerging weepily

from an underground shelter  
to find her family

vaporized by an explosion.  
I might have emerged as she did,

if I hadn't been stuck mid-air  
in a fiberglass tube

full of sweating strangers,  
relentless infants, and silent

uneasy trust in modern technology.  
The cirrus clouds reminded me

of my grandmother's hair  
which had once been

dark like the stewardess' stocking and  
the view from Nastia's battered apartment.



Her stocking was just right.  
The view was beautiful, really.

And my grandmother's hair  
had taken over the world.

My sister and I sipped  
coffee, exchanged glances,

descended toward  
the blue cranium

and crashed into the sermon  
with a troubleshot air

on a g-string, looking up  
at the eyes of our grandmother's son

as Slava lay dead across  
a barbed wire fence back in Moscow.



God has hired temp help  
to itemize my transgressions,  
and layed off the archangels

who once heard my confessions.  
My sins are listed on microfiche  
for projection on cumulous screens

along with a mockingly oversized  
copy of my recorded plea,  
the last shabby synapse gasp

that fizzled in my skull:  
"Suicide in the end is,  
if anything, too dull."



The sounds of Bauzys and his cows,  
a mile east, were carried here

by the wind today, resembling  
bleats, a crack, and the mumbling sea.

Such a blessing to know  
that Bauzys is still alive

this spring, despite the freezing spells.  
The field's killed again, and I hardly mind.

So many blessings since the end of March,  
but no day has been longer than this.

Our half-sprung harvester  
curled up, little

monster of tender heart,  
death has got you

and the rest of us blue, blistered  
by the cold and stilled by sorrow.

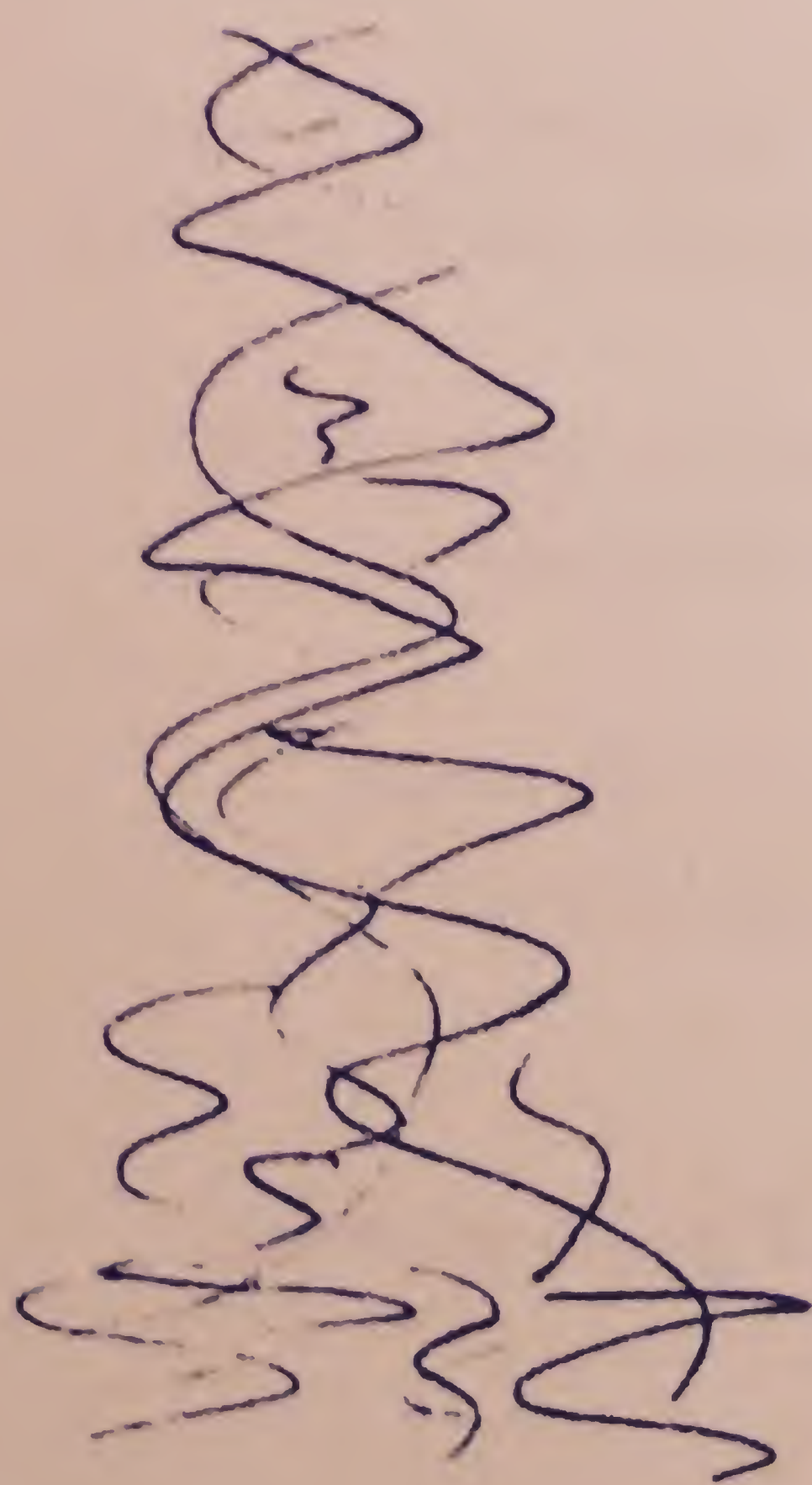
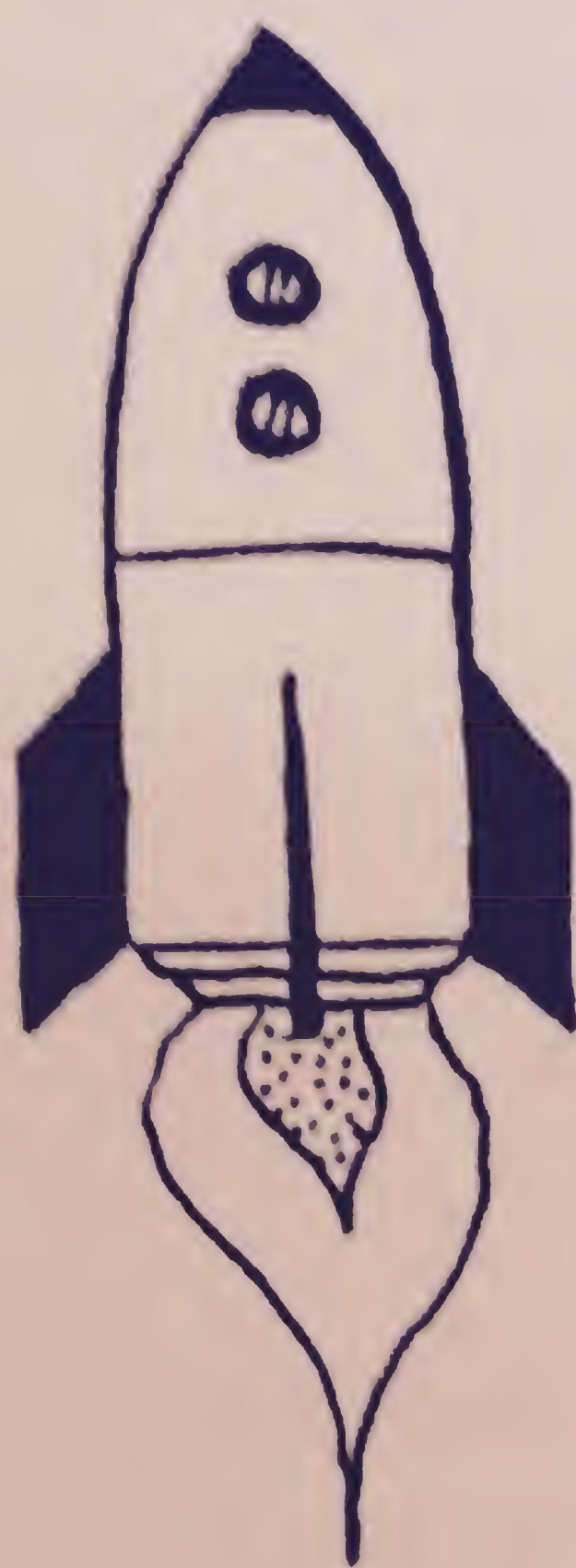
This field is an appropriate place--  
solid but redeemable, small and fair,

the old grass quivers uncertainly  
in the edgily shifting air.

It will roll, and it will wave.  
It will thrash and lacerate.

It will bury.  
And Bauzys will go on plowing.







This evening, lumps are swallowed  
and jitters shaken off by heroes  
in oxygen suits. Men rise up  
to pick God's open pocket.

A black asbestos handkerchief tows eerily  
across the night sky. Someone winces

below, others eat dinner unaware.  
As the feat is accomplished,

flocks of migrating geese tumble  
from the air, followed by light  
aircraft, cargo vessels sink  
amongst blooms of panicking algae.

Away from all this, rural beneficiaries  
of the grand achievement find the stillness

unnerving. The greatest of all  
wars begins in utter silence.

Unable to sleep, I sing my child a lullaby.

Do not fear the darkness.  
Now there is no light to blind you.  
The monsters underneath your bed,  
like you, are laying down their heads.



